

SELL OUT

By
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LIKE MOST PEOPLE, I first read about Edwin P. Wilson in the newspapers in 1981. He was said to be a former operative for the Central Intelligence Agency who had placed himself in the service of the Libyan dictator and godfather of international terrorism, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

In these accounts, Wilson was portrayed as a mysterious figure, sort of a Great Gatsby of the espionage world. What especially caught my eye was that he owned a huge estate called Mt. Airy Farms in the fashionable northern Virginia hunt country — an estate, I would learn, that abutted those of neighbors like the tycoon Paul Mellon, Virginia's Senator John Warner and his then-wife Elizabeth Taylor and Jack Kent Cooke, the multimillionaire owner of the Washington Redskins.

Wilson had acquired the estate while still in the United States intelligence service, and I wondered how this could be. I knew that C.I.A. pay grades were the same as those for other Federal agencies and departments. Then I discovered that the most Wilson had ever gotten in salary from the C.I.A. was \$25,000 a year, and that his salary in his later employment with an ultrasecret Navy spy operation known as Task Force 157 never rose higher than \$32,000 annually.

Just a decade before, I had begun work on "Serpico," the story of the brave officer who had

exposed pervasive corruption in the New York City Police Department. Even in those bad days, a cop who suddenly bought a house on a couple of acres in the suburbs with a pool, say, or a tennis court would have at least attracted some raised eyebrows. At least some questions would have been asked.

All told, Wilson's net worth was more than \$15 million, including approximately \$1 million in numbered Swiss bank accounts and South African gold. Yet nobody in the dark, sensitive, security-conscious circles in which Wilson moved seemed to care how any of this had been made possible.

The C.I.A. remained silent about Wilson, where he had come from, what his role in the agency had been. But as his name continued to be embarrassingly coupled with the C.I.A. in headline after headline, other stories, attributed to unnamed intelligence sources, started appearing — in the news media and then in a book by a Washington author, Joseph C. Goulden — that dismissed Wilson as a fringe player whose

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law-enforcement and political corruption, my sole connection with the spy business had been when I was a reporter and the C.I.A. tried to recruit me in hopes of using my journalistic credentials for its own purposes.

Still, I had developed trusted sources over the years, and through them I met others who enabled me to gain access to classified documents that detailed Wilson's intelligence career. These included career summaries and evaluations from the C.I.A. and the Office of Naval Intelligence, as well as reports by the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms; the Defense Investigative Service, and the C.I.A.'s Office of the Inspector General.

Through these documents, and through dozens of interviews with people who had worked or dealt with Wilson, I discovered that he had in fact been a highly valued agent who had not been fired at all, but rather had left the C.I.A. because he wanted to. Even more astonishing, I learned that for a long period of time both the C.I.A. and the F.B.I. had a very good idea of what Wilson was up to in Libya and had done essentially nothing to stop him.

Far from hindering his activities, in fact, the traditions and procedures of the intelligence community were in many ways Wilson's greatest asset, even after the true nature of his dealings was disclosed. Although the personal characteristics that were to shape Wilson's career were evident even before he joined the C.I.A., the agency afforded him the opportunity to act upon those traits, especially when he got into covert paramilitary operations. There he learned the fine art of falsification, of creating dummy business entities, of moving funds through the international banking system so they couldn't be traced.

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